

2007-2008 CHARTER ISSUE SUMMARY

New Commitments to Unincorporated Area Residents

Issue subject: Should the Charter be amended to require that the Executive designate within his or her office a senior official with primary responsibility for the communication with and provision of service for urban and rural unincorporated King County? Additionally, should the Council be required to designate within the administrative offices or executive departments a structure or structures with the power and responsibility to serve urban and rural unincorporated King County? Should the Preamble be amended to reflect the county's dual role as both a regional and local government?

Issue raised by: Rural area leaders, including from the Unincorporated Area Councils, initially raised the idea of creating a department or strong position for unincorporated and/or rural affairs within county government.

Description of issue: The Commission formed the Rural/Local Issues Subcommittee to address the concerns of rural and unincorporated area residents, for whom King County is the local government and service provider. Some rural residents have expressed frustration at their minority status within the local government representing them. About 142,000 county residents reside in rural unincorporated areas. The county is also faced with complex issues in representing the nearly 226,000 residents of urban unincorporated areas, including annexation and the provision of services.

The 1997 Charter Review Commission found there was a need "to provide a stronger voice for unincorporated citizens in King County decisions affecting them." The Commission recommended a number of changes to county government to strengthen representation of unincorporated areas, most of which were not acted upon. In 2004, the King County Commission on Governance went so far as to recommend the formation of Townships to give greater voice to unincorporated area residents. At public meetings held by the Commission in 2007, we heard from many citizens that these issues remain unresolved.

The Rural/Local Subcommittee prioritized finding a solution or solutions to these concerns. In developing our recommendations, we considered a wide range of options. Staff presented a briefing paper detailing various options, including:

- Strengthening, replacing, or reducing the role of the Unincorporated Area Councils
- Creating a Rural/Unincorporated Affairs Department under the Executive
- Implementing subarea/community planning
- Forming a rural/unincorporated advisory council, commission, or planning council
- Hiring additional staff for councilmembers with unincorporated areas in their districts
- Restructuring certain staff under the Executive (the Executive's Rural Services Initiative)
- Instituting townships

The following goals guided us in considering the options. The most effective solution should:

- 1) Provide an authoritative and substantive **voice and focus** for unincorporated issues;
- 2) Show unincorporated area residents that their issues are a **priority**;
- 3) Recognize that the county has a **dual role** as both a regional and local government; and
- 4) Create a **permanent** structure that will serve residents over the long term.
- 5) Facilitate transition of urban unincorporated residents into cities, the long-term providers of urban services in King County.

The committee felt strongly that a high-level position within the Office of the Executive, tasked with accomplishing these goals, would be most effectual. The committee was most interested in a position at the level of a Deputy Executive for Rural and Unincorporated Affairs.

The Executive brought forward the current language, and the committee agreed that it was an appropriate way to implement this idea. It is consistent with the structure of the Charter, which includes few specific job titles; it assigns responsibility to both the Council and Executive; and it has demonstrated support from within the Executive's office. The committee believes that a high level of commitment from the Executive and Council is necessary for the meaningful implementation and success of this position, and that the new position will receive their support.

Senior Official – Under this amendment, the Executive would be required to create a high-level position as part of his or her duties established in Charter Section 320.20. The Council would also be required, as part of its duties as established in Charter Section 220.20, to ensure that a structure or structures be created with the power and responsibility to service unincorporated areas of the county. In essence, the Council would have an oversight role in ensuring that the county made an adequate organizational commitment to the unincorporated areas, while the Executive would be responsible for implementing and overseeing a specific position.

Preamble – The committee also found that the Charter did not explicitly address the county's responsibilities to unincorporated areas, and recommends amending the Preamble to reflect the county's dual role as both a regional government for the entire county and a local government for the unincorporated areas. The Preamble states the purpose of the Charter, and is a de facto mission statement for the County. Amending the Preamble makes a powerful statement to citizens about their county's priorities, and reflects a permanent commitment on the part of county government to providing high-quality governance, services, and quality of life in the unincorporated areas.

Proposed Charter Amendments

220.20 Powers (The Metropolitan County Council)

The county council shall be the policy determining body of the county and shall have all legislative powers of the county under this charter. The county council shall exercise its legislative power by the adoption and enactment of ordinances; shall levy taxes, appropriate revenue and adopt budgets for the county; shall establish the compensation to be paid to all county officers and employees and shall provide for the reimbursement of expenses; except as otherwise provided herein shall have the power to establish, abolish, combine and divide administrative offices and executive departments and to establish their powers and responsibilities; shall designate within the administrative offices or executive departments a structure or structures with the power and responsibility to serve unincorporated King County; ...

320.20 Powers and Duties (County Executive)

The county executive shall be the chief executive officer of the county and shall have all the executive powers of the county which are not expressly vested in other specific elective officers by this charter; shall supervise all administrative offices and executive departments established by this charter or created by the county council; shall designate within the office of the executive a senior official with primary responsibility for the communication with and oversight of service provision to rural unincorporated King County and to urban unincorporated King County including services to facilitate transition of urban unincorporated areas to cities;

Preamble –

We, the people of King County, Washington, in order to form a more just and orderly government, establish separate legislative and executive branches, insure responsibility and accountability for local and regional county governance and services, enable effective citizen participation, preserve a healthy urban and rural environment and economy, and secure the benefits of home rule and self-government, in accordance with the Constitution of the State of Washington, do adopt this charter.

Subcommittee Recommendations:

The Subcommittee voted unanimously in support of the above language. Additionally, the Subcommittee supported the inclusion of language in the Commission’s final report that specifies that “the position must be at a level reporting directly to the Executive, and that the position ‘speaks’ (within its scope) with the authority of the Executive.”

Summary of arguments for and against:

Pros: Provides a high level of attention to the issues of unincorporated King County residents.

Cons: Unincorporated King County may not always be such a major segment of our county’s population, and a high-level position may be inappropriate in the far future.

Reference documents:

Four Creeks Unincorporated Area Council President Tom Carpenter’s memo of 2/19/08, “Executive’s alternative proposal analysis”

Note of 2/8/08 from Executive Chief of Staff Kurt Triplett to Rural/Local Subcommittee